

SPEECH

Redford targets wilderness bill

Utah's congressional delegation spreading 'untruths,' actor says.

By Brooke Adams
Deseret News staff writer

Actor Robert Redford is calling for perseverance in the battle over the "natural soul of Utah" as the state's congressional delegation tries to resurrect its wilderness bill.

The delegation has engaged in a "comprehensive campaign based on untruths" to disparage supporters of Utah wilderness since their bill stalled in Congress, Redford said.

"What we've seen to date in the fight to save Utah's wilderness is a great shining example of collective action, of the power of the people's connection to the natural surroundings," Redford said. "And, sadly, we find the politicians find this threatening, to say the least, because they can't control it. And because they can't control it, they'll attempt to undermine it."

Redford spoke at the Wallace Stegner Symposium dinner this weekend at the University Park Hotel in Salt Lake City. The symposium was the inaugural event of the Wallace Stegner Center for Land, Resources and the Environment, located at the University of Utah's College of Law.

Stegner, who died in 1993, was an eloquent spokesman for conservation and preservation of the West, Redford said in his tribute to the author. Stegner's gift of environmental writings can be repaid by being vigilant in protecting wild places, he said.

"We can carry that legacy into action and keep that voice heard and do the best we can, because it's all we've got," Redford said.

Redford himself could serve as an example of perseverance. From the Kaiparowits Plateau to Provo Canyon, he has been an ardent champion of protecting Utah's "natural soul" for decades.

Not all Utahns welcome his contributions. He's been burned in effigy and vilified in letters and

public debate on wilderness issues. Redford remains undaunted in his commitment to environmental issues.

"Somebody's got to speak out for Utah's assets," he said. "The leaders aren't."

Redford, recasting characters in John McPhee's book "Encounters with the Archdruid," would pair Rep. Jim Hansen, R-Utah, with Stegner in a raft floating down some Utah river.

He can, Redford say, imagine their conversation. Hansen would talk of the need to exploit the Escalante River for the sake of man. Stegner would talk about the kind of silence in which you can hear the swish of falling stars.

"Wally would make it about life, he would make it come to life and he would give it life," Redford said.

Redford said Stegner's "Wilderness Letter," though written in 1960, is a perfect frame for the debate today over Utah wilderness.

"I remember Wally speaking somewhere near here, somewhere

near the university when we were last together, and he was talking about Utah's greatest liability being itself in terms of those assets," Redford said.

The Utah Public Lands Management Act proposed by the Congressional delegation would set aside 2 million acres of wilderness, which The Wilderness Society derided as a "bald giveaway of spectacular places that belong to each and every American."

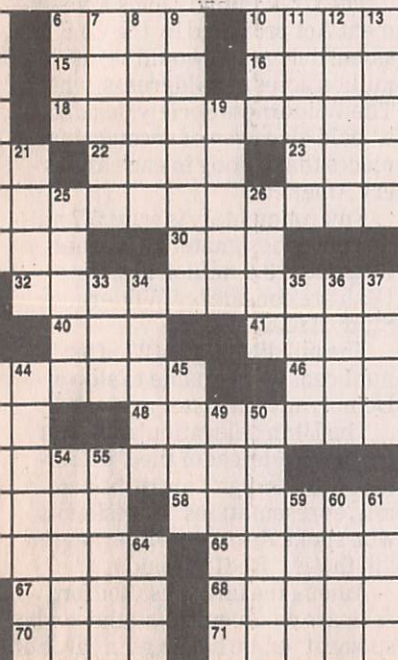
Environmentalists want 5.7 million acres designated wilderness. Currently, 3.2 million acres in Utah are considered Wilderness Study Areas.

The bill died March 27 after Republicans were unable to stop a Democratic filibuster against it.

The Utah delegation's attempt to spin the defeat of their wilderness bill through "untruths and misrepresentations" of residents who spoke for more wilderness is "pathetic," Redford said.

Among the untruths, Redford said, are comments that: those who spoke at public hearings in favor of more wilderness were paid; environmental groups spent millions to defeat the bill; environmentalists are unwilling to compromise; and, those who opposed the bill are a small group of extremists.

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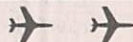
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